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editorial

Gas prices spark bad ideas

Rising gasoline prices have stirred up a remarkable number of really dumb ideas, as both Republicans and Democrats are touting quick fixes that would prove unhelpful in the short term and financially disastrous in the long run.

First came the idea promoted by Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., of giving taxpayers a \$100 rebate to offset high gas prices. The money would come from the federal treasury, which of course is funded by the very taxpayers that the rebates purportedly would help. Many voters quickly saw through the ruse, so the rebate plan appears to have died an early political death. Good riddance.

The rebates would have worsened the federal deficit, which stands at a record \$319 billion. So, to give taxpayers just enough cash to fill up once or twice, congressional Republicans would have saddled taxpayers with more long-term national debt.

Some Democrats are promoting an equally dubious way to cash in on consumer ire, by suspending the federal fuel tax of 18.4 cents per gallon of gasoline and 24 cents per gallon of diesel. Just think of the potholes that wouldn't get fixed or the roads that would continue to be overwhelmed by growing traffic volumes if that happened. Or, Congress would have to fund the highway projects with even more deficit spending.

Such silliness isn't confined to Washington. In Colorado's legislature, Rep. Mark Cloer, R-Colorado Springs, proposed temporarily suspending the state's fuel taxes of 22 cents per gallon of gasoline and 20.5 cents per gallon of diesel. Sen. Ron May, another Colorado Springs Republican, said the effect on our decrepit highways would be "absolute devastation." Wisely, the House Finance Committee nixed the tax suspension on a bipartisan, 9-4 vote.

Other ideas would be largely symbolic. In the wake of oil companies' recent record profits, Democrats U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette of Denver and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon want Congress to repeal \$2 billion in tax breaks that lawmakers gave the industry last summer. An industry with such enormous resources shouldn't be at the trough to receive federal subsidies.

The most effective way Congress could help consumers would be to require carmakers to boost vehicle fuel mileage. Despite calls to wean Americans off oil imports, federal rules for passenger car efficiency have been stuck for 15 years at 27.5 miles per gallon. Improving to 35 mpg - a very achievable goal - would save the United States 440 million barrels of oil a year. That kind of conservation would do more to help America's energy picture than all the hot air coming off Capitol Hill ever could.